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# Before the FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION Washington, DC 20554

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In the Matter of	) } JUN 2 3 1999
Implementation of the Subscriber Carrier	)  FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION  OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
Selection Changes Provisions of the	)
Telecommunications Act of 1996	) )
Policies and Rules Concerning	) CC Docket No. 94-129
Unauthorized Changes of Consumers	· )
Long Distance Carriers	)

## SUPPORT/OPPOSITION OF U S WEST COMMUNICATIONS, INC. TO PETITIONS FOR RECONSIDERATION AND/OR CLARIFICATION

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June 23, 1999

No. of Copies rec'd 1

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#### SUPPORT/OPPOSITION OF U S WEST COMMUNICATIONS, INC. TO PETITIONS FOR RECONSIDERATION AND/OR CLARIFICATION

#### I. <u>INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY</u>

U S WEST Communications, Inc. ("U S WEST") supports a number of the arguments for reconsideration and/or clarification made in the variously filed Petitions with the Federal Communications Commission ("FCC" or "Commission") regarding the above-referenced matter. In a number of particulars, U S WEST believes the Commission's rules require substantive revision on reconsideration. In particular, the Commission's decision to absolve certain individuals of any financial liability for placed toll calls is contrary to Congressional intent and was imposed in an arbitrary and capricious fashion. It should be reversed. Also, aspects of the Commission's dispute resolution and liability rules, in particular the role/scope of the actions

Petitions for Reconsideration/Clarification filed Mar. 18, 1999.

delegated to the authorized carrier (i.e., the final call on whether a "slam occurred" and the obligation to rebill the charges associated with an exonerated carrier), need to be modified.

The Commission was not in error, however, when it determined that a customer must communicate personally and directly with a local exchange carrier ("LEC") before a Preferred Carrier ("PC") freeze would be instituted or removed. In this respect, the Commission confirmed the "no agency" aspect of the PC administrative structure. Given that PC freeze policies were developed to provide a remedy within an interexchange carrier ("IXC") change environment -- where verifications have been mandated for years yet slamming conduct continued unabated -- it would make little sense to allow another "verification" to trump the basic nature of the PC protection.

With regard to the proper role of LECs faced with specific carriers sporting excessively high slamming rates, U S WEST believes that the Rural LECs and National Telephone Cooperative Association ("NTCA") Petitions present persuasive arguments that the Commission improperly analyzed the issue of separate LEC verification of IXC carrier change orders, as well as the nature of the information associated with carrier changes.

Given the material and high numbers of slamming transactions -- most of which are proffered by IXC "agents" claiming that proper verification has occurred with their customer "principal" -- the Commission's legal and public interest analysis is wrong when it forbids LECs who want to -- or who have

reason to suspect something untoward -- from advising common customers of basic carrier change information. The Commission should reverse its position on this matter. At most, regulations around <u>how</u> such verifications can occur (<u>i.e.</u>, time, place and manner regulations) would be appropriate.

Finally, the Commission should speak to the matter of "stale LOAs"

[Letters of Agency]. Either through a decision or a formal rule, the Commission should establish some maximum time from the date of execution after which a carrier **should not submit** an LOA.

#### II. THE ABSOLUTION OF CHARGES POLICY SHOULD BE REVERSED

While U S WEST has been a staunch supporter of the consumer and the public interest on the matter of slamming, we have <u>never</u> endorsed absolution of charges for slamming (absent a carrier's independent determination that such was a remedy that carrier wanted to accord the customer). The potential for fraud is simply too great; especially given the potential for information sharing around the matter of "absolution schemes" through the Internet.<sup>2</sup>

It was with great disappointment then that we read of the Commission's decision to go down this road. Given the scantiest of evidence of the impact of an absolution policy<sup>3</sup> and armed primarily with a slogan -- "Take the Profit Out of Slamming"-- the Commission mandates an absolution policy **apparently** to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> <u>See</u> Comments of U S WEST, Inc. to Notice of Proposed Rule Making and Petition for Reconsideration of Memorandum Opinion and Order on Reconsideration, CC Docket No. 94-129, filed Sep. 15, 1997 at 41-46.

appease a Congress on the run (with respect to potential revised legislation in this area)<sup>4</sup> and a Chairman who -- contrary to sound administrative jurisprudence -- had already determined that absolution was the righteous result.<sup>5</sup> Both motivators lack the kind of reasoned decision-making analysis that should accompany so bold a step as mandating that carriers provide service for free, especially for activity that often will occur by "mistake" or without negligence.

U S WEST supports the Petitions of AT&T Corp. ("AT&T") and Frontier Corporation ("Frontier") urging the Commission to reconsider this aspect of its Second Report and Order. For all the reasons outlined in those Petitions (ranging from Commission deviation from the Congressionally-outlined remedy, to the potential for fraud, to the negative effect on the public from increased rates), the Commission's decision was a bad one and should be reversed.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Support for the Commission's position came mostly from commentors arguing that it was a good idea.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> It is common knowledge that as the Commission was working toward its Second Report and Order a number of slamming bills were making their way through Congress. The "last" iteration of those bills included an absolution provision. The bill, however, did not pass.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> <u>See</u> letter from William E. Kennard, Federal Communications Commission to the Honorable Richard J. Durbin, United States Senator dated Sep. 3, 1998.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Frontier at 4-9; AT&T at 4-6, 11-12.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Sprint Corporation ("Sprint") at 11-12; GTE Service Corporation ("GTE") at 3-4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Frontier at 16.

Even if such were an appropriate executive policy, however, the form of the remedy lacks the signature of a prudent market mediator. As AT&T argues, allowing the 30-day absolution to run as an absolute matter from the date of the unauthorized change, rather than from the point of subscriber discovery, creates a powerful perverse incentive for customers to refrain from reporting slamming incidents and to begin the process of getting back to their authorized carrier. And, by putting no cap on the amount a customer can enjoy by way of absolution, the potential for fraud becomes more of an open invitation.

The Commission should reverse its absolution policy and fashion rules more closely aligned with the Congressional remedy outlined in Section 258. That Section provides that the unauthorized carrier is to pay over whatever funds (and all the funds) it collects from the subscriber. Over and out. In those cases where a customer has not yet paid the putatively bad-acting, slamming carrier, Congress did not see fit to offer that customer a form of "liquidated damages," either in the nature of a sum certain or free service for

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> AT&T at 11-13 and nn.19-21.

The Commission's free service policy is all the more ironic given that the Commission has an **open** proceeding on interexchange carrier fraud. See In the Matter of Policies and Rules Concerning Toll Fraud, Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, 8 FCC Rcd. 8618 (1993). In the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking associated with that proceeding, the Commission waxes eloquently on the seriousness of fraud in the telecommunications industry and its costs to carriers and consumers alike. Id. at 8619-20 ¶ 4. Yet, here, the Commission basically opens the floodgates to fraud rather than give any consideration to

30 days (possibly involving thousands of dollars of free service). Unless and until Congress acts otherwise," the Commission should give effect to the Congressional language and allow commerce to proceed unencumbered by the spectre of fraud in the execution of telecommunications transactions.

## III. THE COMMISSION'S IRRATIONAL LIABILITY/DISPUTE RESOLUTION STRUCTURE SHOULD BE REVISED

It is not surprising that carriers are looking toward creating a Third Party Dispute Resolution (or Liability) Administrator to secure an avoidance from the Commission's rules.<sup>12</sup> The rules as currently written reflect a detachment from rational commercial practice, lack internal cohesion, and frankly seem calculated to push carriers over the edge into some kind of "self-regulatory process."

U S WEST supports almost every objection filed with respect to these rules.

• They arguably put the authorized carrier in an adjudicative role that

damming it as it purported to want to do in the discussion associated with the pending proceeding.

While it is understandable how a regulatory agency might want to "get on top" of Congressional interests and, perhaps, avoid unnecessary regulatory activity if Congress is poised to change its position, it is inappropriate to ignore current Congressional mandates in anticipation of future ones. To do so confuses the role of the legislative and executive branch. <u>See</u> Frontier at 3-9.

<sup>12 47</sup> C.F.R. § 64.1100.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> U S WEST here states what the rules "arguably" do because, as SBC Communications, Inc. ("SBC") (at 5) has pointed out, certain rules only seem to be activated upon a carrier decision to proceed with some type of action. On the other hand, if an authorized carrier determines to <u>forego</u> reimbursement (for example), it is <u>not</u> required by the rule to do so. <u>Compare SBC</u> at 9

this carrier (a) cannot carry out in a neutral manner given its financial and relationship interests with the subscriber and (b) will have no interest in pursuing given the unrecompensed costs of administration. Moreover, there are not articulated standards associated with the authorized carrier's determinations.

- They arguably require the authorized carrier to bill for charges that are not its own -- an affront to the associational principles acknowledged in the First Amendment and judicial precedent, which the Commission totally ignores.<sup>16</sup>
- If the authorized carrier does not want to go through all this hassle, it simply looses its money in total abrogation of Section 258 which imposes the obligation to act on the unauthorized, not the authorized carrier.<sup>17</sup> And, in those cases where the cause of the slam was inadvertence, proceeding through an "extremely expensive and time-consuming" process for recoupment will probably not be deemed worth the candle.<sup>18</sup>

Since there are considerable obstacles for an authorized carrier

(seeking "clarification" of this matter). And see RCN Telecom Services, Inc. ("RCN") at 5-6. See also Frontier at 16 ("The rules provide no incentive for authorized carriers to pursue their remedies simply because the costs of proceeding will far outweigh any increased revenues that may result.").

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> See RCN at 3-5; Excel Telecommunications, Inc. ("Excel") at 3-4; AT&T at 6-7.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> <u>See</u> AT&T at 7-8; MediaOne Group ("MediaOne") at 7-8 (and noting that the proffer by the "unauthorized carrier" of a taped verification is not, in and of itself, dispositive of the validity of change request). <u>And see</u> RCN at 4 and n.3 (noting also the peculiar determination that the proffered verification does not make out even a *prima faciae* case of validity).

<sup>16</sup> See SBC at 1-4; AT&T at 7 and n.10.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> <u>See</u> AT&T at 8, Frontier at 16-18 (both noting the impropriety of shifting the re-rating obligation from the unauthorized carrier -- where it was lodged under the former FCC rules -- to the authorized carrier which increases the authorized carrier's costs and consumes its resources, possibly to such an extent that the "remedy" will never be pursued). <u>And see</u> AT&T at 3 n.5, noting that re-rating only occurs when the customer pays charges to the unauthorized carrier. If no payment has occurred, no re-rating occurs but "absolution" does.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> See Frontier at 13.

attempting to carry out the provisions of the Commission's rules in a principled manner, it is no surprise that carriers are looking to rule avoidance. It is unfortunate, however, when a simple Congressional enactment (and eight-line statutory provision) becomes so complicated in the implementation (an eighty-four page Order) that private parties seek to structure their own "self-regulatory" edifice to accommodate reasonable commercial engagement.

The Commission should reconsider its rules. It should more closely align its rules and remedies with the Congressional prescriptions in Section 258. The fact that such remedy <u>only</u> addresses paying customers is not a matter of policy to be reversed by the Commission through regulatory correction. The onus of regulatory engagement in the Congressional structure is -- as it should be -- on the unauthorized carrier. That is where it should remain.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> <u>See</u> AT&T at 3, stating that the "absolution remedy and its associated liability scheme makes no sense as a matter of policy because it prescribes an unworkable, unduly costly and grossly unfair procedure for adjudicating carriers' liability for slamming claims while at the same time creating powerful incentives for unnecessary delay, and even fraudulent conduct, by customers in reporting slamming claims."

As aptly pointed out by AT&T: "None of the administrative systems required for this [dispute resolution/liability] mechanism to function . . . now exists, and the decision ignores the enormous burden and expense to carriers of implementing these processes. In all events, . . . this convoluted procedure also imposes uncompensated costs on parties who took no role in the unauthorized change, rewards uncooperative or recalcitrant carriers, and is calculated to increase burdensome administrative litigation that needlessly consumes scarce Commission resources. Such cannot be squared with the Commission's goal of protecting consumers from unauthorized carrier changes." Id. at 9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> In addition, as SBC mentions, there are other market corrections in place independent of Commission compulsion. LECs that act as billing and

### IV. PC PROTECTION SHOULD REMAIN A PERSONAL "NO AGENCY" DECISION

In a striking example of the fey way in which carriers increasingly posit issues for reconsideration before the Commission (this advocacy takes on the following format: "It is possible, that perhaps, maybe, some carriers might misunderstand the Commission's requirements unless the Commission speaks more clearer on the matter," when in fact the "clear statement" the advocating party is seeking is just the opposite of what the Commission has actually said or required), RCN and Excel assert that the Commission's Second Report and Order should be clarified so that LECs do not misunderstand it to mean that a carrier's submission of a PC freeze on behalf of a customer -- even if verified --

collections agents have, in many cases, adopted a 100% <u>adjustment</u> (as opposed to "forgiveness") policy, which takes the disputed charges off the bill pending resolution of the dispute. (In those cases where the customer has paid, the adjustment takes the form of a credit. Where the customer has not paid, the adjustment is a removal of the charges.) <u>See</u> discussion of this practice at SBC at 7-9.

This provides customers with a significant consumer protection cover. Quite often, if the charges were the result of slamming they do not get rebilled. While this leaves the unauthorized carrier with nothing to pay to the authorized carrier (that is, renders the transaction more of a "non-paying consumer" than a paying one), U S WEST at least has gained the concurrence of those for whom it bills to respond to consumer allegations of slamming in this manner. While the authorized carrier generally receives no money from the slamming carrier under this scenario in the absence of rebilling, for the moment the carriers are resigned to the process as being accommodating of consumers while not unduly burdensome to carriers, at least during the pendency of the investigation regarding the viability of a Third Party Dispute Resolution Administrator.

need not be processed by a LEC.<sup>22</sup> AT&T, on the other hand, gets it right -- the Order holds that such orders will not be given effect.<sup>23</sup>

That is, the hallmark of PC protection -- that it is a personal message communicated by the principal (i.e., the customer) and <u>not</u> through any agent - is appropriately sustained in the Commission's <u>Second Report and Order</u>.

That decision should <u>not</u> be changed.

PC protections arose in an environment where IXC's were not only claiming they were agents of the customer but also that they had verified the customer's choice to change carriers. Often these were just bold lies; at other times, the business practices associated with the IXC's alleged "agency" were so deficient that no consumer could have been said to have verified the change given the shoddy, often materially deceptive communications that occurred.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> <u>See</u>, <u>e.g.</u>, RCN at 7-8 ("incumbent LECs could interpret the Commission's PC freeze regulations, as currently drafted, to require that customers must submit requests to initiate or lift a PC freeze directly to the LEC that actually implements the PC freeze."); Excel at 6-7 (to the same effect).

Because RCN and Excel are incorrect when they assume that a carrier LOA or verification can be proffered to a LEC to either establish or lift a PC freeze, its request that the Commission clarify that the "verification" necessary to support this activity can be accomplished at the same time as the PC change is unnecessary. RCN at 8-9; Excel at 7-9. Non-LEC carriers need not be bothered with PC protection choices or verifications since they will not be able to independently submit (or attest to) authorization in this area.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> AT&T at 14 (the FCC "declined to require LECs to accept subscriber-authorized freeze changes directly from submitting carriers where there has been independent third-party verification of those orders"), 15 (the FCC "decline[d] to modify the Commission's rules to allow direct carrier submission of freeze change, even if those orders were first verified by a neutral third party").

While there were then, and there are now, good, wholesome IXCs in the market, PC protections are most valuable to protect against the other types of carriers. In allowing the latter to be accomplished, claims of "verifications" of PC protections on behalf of consumers should not be permitted. Many customers who have PC protections were ostensibly "verified" regarding the change before it occurred. The "verification" either never occurred or did not do so in a meaningful or clear manner. In choosing the PC protection, the consumer is attempting the protect themselves against claims by ostensible agents that a "verification" process supports the change of carrier.

For this elementary reason, the Commission must <u>not</u> change its position regarding the need for there to be a personal engagement between the customer and the LEC regarding establishment of removal of PC protections (whose PC protection offering it is, after all). As the Commission stated, "the essence of a preferred carrier freeze is that a subscriber must specifically communicate his or her intent to request or lift a freeze. . . . [and that it is the] limitation on lifting preferred carrier freezes [that] gives the freeze mechanism its protective effect."<sup>24</sup> For this reason, the Commission was correct in incorporating into the definition of PC freeze the requirement that a LEC "change a subscriber's carrier only after it receives express written or oral

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Slamming Order ¶ 131.

consent from that subscriber to lift the freeze."25

#### V. INDEPENDENT LEC VERIFICATIONS

As the Rural LECs and NTCA discuss, the customer/subscriber -- the principal in any carrier-change transaction -- clearly has the right to know information about potential activity on the account, including carrier changes. This is particularly true, it would seem, where account activity is being generated by an entity other than the account subscriber, <u>i.e.</u>, one claiming to act in an agency capacity.

The Commission should reconsider its position on "no separate verification" (especially as the ultimate decision of the Commission was grounded in Section 222). The Commission's current position is at odds both with the evidence and the public interest.

Evidence of slamming in the 40 and 50 percent ranges screams out for additional prophylactic activity to be taken up front -- activity such as additional verification. It is entirely inappropriate to treat these cases at the back end, with a "remedy" (i.e., absolution or credits). Rather than an outright prohibition on such LEC/CLEC verifications, the Commission should, at most, regulate the "form, content and scope" of the verification contact.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> <u>Id.</u> ¶ 147 (emphasis added). <u>And see</u> ¶ 175 (in the <u>Further Notice</u> portion of the Commission's December 23, 1998 publication) where the Commission posits the question of whether accepting PIC freezes over the Internet would be appropriate in light of the fact that the question of the actual subscriber's identity might be difficult to discern.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Rural Carriers at 3-5; NTCA at 15-16.

#### VI. HELD LOAS

U S WEST supports the SBC proposal that the Commission promulgate a rule that prohibits submitting carriers from sending in "stale" LOAs.<sup>27</sup> Like SBC, U S WEST has seen LOAs that talk about service initiations (particularly with respect to "intraLATA toll") in the future when it becomes available through the soliciting carrier. Most often, these LOAs do <u>not</u> conform to the Commission's to-be-effective rules regarding service differentiations, either with respect to the solicitation or the verifications. For this reason alone, the submission of these types of LOAs should be seriously circumscribed.

The Commission should establish a maximum time from the date of execution for an LOA to be **submitted** (60 days perhaps). There is no good reason to allow these LOAs to sit, causing confusion for customers and calls of dismay into LECs' business offices regarding activity no longer remembered.

Finally, it is important to fashion the rule as applying directly to the submitting, rather than the executing carrier. Executing carriers receive at least 50% of carrier-change transactions through mechanized systems. Those systems are not set up to scan LOAs or to capture material information regarding their terms. Thus, the rule should not prohibit the processing of an LOA after a certain date. Rather, the rule should be directed to the entity actually a party to the contractual agreement with the customer and the most capable of conforming their behavior to the obligation.

#### VII. CONCLUSION

In line with the above comments, U S WEST supports the reconsideration of at least portions of the Commission's rules. Absolution rights should be reversed and the Commission should align its rules more closely with the Congressional model outlined in Section 258. The dispute resolution and liability rules should be revised to more reasonably define the role of an authorized carrier *vis-à-vis* its competitor carrier -- the alleged "slammer." As currently written, those rules are not only at odds with reasonable commercial practice but possibly fundamental fairness, as well.

The PC freeze rules should <u>not</u> be changed. Personal subscriber control is the essence of the PC freeze process and nothing should be done to abrogate the criticality of that personal control.

The Commission should reconsider its decision regarding LEC/CLECs verifying carrier changes, especially in circumstances where the level of slamming is high or other facts suggest concern. At least the Commission should modify its analysis, which stretches the language of Section 222 beyond reasoned interpretation. A customer is often shared between a LEC/CLEC and an IXC. Where it is the LEC's obligation to program its switch to accommodate the carrier change request (a request from an agent), and to change the particular information populating the customer's account, the LEC violates no "confidentiality" obligation by communicating with the affected customer -- the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> SBC at 11-12.

affected principal in the transaction.

Finally, the Commission should promulgate a rule prohibiting the submission of stale LOAs. That decision/rule should create obligations on the submitting -- rather than the executing -- carrier, since it is the former who controls the submission and is in the position to manage the process in a timely manner.

Respectfully submitted,

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June 23, 1999

#### **CERTIFICATE OF SERVICE**

I, Rebecca Ward, do hereby certify that on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of June, 1999, I have caused a copy of the foregoing SUPPORT/OPPOSITION OF U S WEST COMMUNICATIONS, INC. TO PETITIONS FOR RECONSIDERATION

AND/OR CLARIFICATION to be served, via first class United States Mail, postage prepaid, upon the persons listed on the attached service list.

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(CC94-129F.doc Last Update: 6/23/99